

MAY 30TH or JUNE 2ND, 2019: ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Acts 1:2-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Luke 24:46-53

We always encounter confusion when we deal with Jesus' ascension. Only those who ignore Scripture and simply adhere to our yearly liturgical framework are spared the mixed messages our sacred authors convey. Though the vast majority of Christians believe Jesus ascended to heaven 40 days after his resurrection and is securely ensconced in that celestial zip code, only one evangelist actually narrates such an event: Luke in his Acts of the Apostles. It's clear from Mark, Matthew and John's narratives that the risen Jesus is simply "out there" somewhere. He/she hasn't gone anywhere. The risen Christ could "pop up" anytime at anyplace to anyone.

Even today's Lucan gospel pericope doesn't appear to describe a definite departure. The passage talks about Jesus being "taken up to heaven," but within the first verses of Acts he's again back among his followers teaching them for 40 days. It appears the evangelist is saying only that at this point of salvation history Jesus comes and goes. I, for instance, can "go to the store," but a little later in the day, I'll be back. In this case, Jesus is not yet leaving us for good.

The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians isn't much help. He simply speaks poetically about the position the risen Jesus maintains in each of our lives. Among other things, God has seated him/her "at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power and dominion and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come." Beautiful thought, but poetry isn't history. In some sense it's parallel to telling your significant other, "The sun and moon rise over you."

Taking that for granted, the question students of Scripture must answer is, "Why does Luke uniquely remove Jesus?" Why does he disagree with the other three evangelists on that point? He alone claims Jesus leaves and doesn't come back. He seems to take the ascension literally, not poetically. There must be a reason for him to have developed such a theology.

According to most scholars, Luke uniquely seems to zero in on the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. For him that "promise of my Father" is at the heart of the Christian community. We can't carry on Jesus' ministry without the Spirit. How would we know what to do or in what direction to proceed? Jesus' ministry is a living entity. We don't just memorize a plan, then keep repeating it. It's something to be experienced, a new event every day. According to Luke, we're continually learning there's more than one way to preach "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Without the Spirit, the message of Jesus dies.

In some sense, Luke thinks it's necessary to get Jesus "out of the way" before the Spirit "takes over," the Spirit who will empower us to be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That seems to be why Luke's angel warns the disciples to stop "looking up to the sky." The Jesus whom many first century Christians are still expecting to come back in the Parousia is now gone. Though we presume he'll eventually return, we've work to do in the meantime. And it's the Spirit who will guide us into and through that work. What a shame to miss the main event while we're waiting for a preliminary event to take place.

Were we in Luke's place today, what would we want "out of the way?" What's keeping us from making the Spirit the center of our lives? Any ideas? As a scriptural Catholic I suspect our hierarchical system would garner more than a few votes.

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JUNE 9TH, 2019: PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

Though I intend each of these commentaries to be read independent of my other commentaries, I'm afraid this particular Pentecost piece logically follows on last week's.

For many Catholics, today's feast is somewhat parallel to the fourth commandment. We eventually outgrew it. Just as God's command to "obey" our parents only applied when we were children, so anything to do with the Holy Spirit came into our lives only when we were young enough to take our school exams. Though the Cardinals entering a papal conclave logically join in singing "Come Holy Spirit" before they choose the next pope, I've never heard of any parish singing that hymn before they pick their next pastor, nor any diocese doing so before it elects its next bishop. The hierarchical system we've created – then later blamed on the historical Jesus – has taken away the necessity to depend on the Spirit for any help in our lives of faith.

When, in the summer of 1965, I returned to the United States from Rome as a newly ordained priest, I was expecting to get a fair amount of static from the older parishioners of any parish to which I was assigned. They'd be the group most resisting the Vatican II changes I was bringing with me. They had, for a lifetime, bought into the theology that the Roman Catholic Church was founded by Jesus as an unchangeable institution, an institution that this young priest was informing them was changing.

To my surprise, I discovered my presuppositions weren't always verified. The elderly were frequently my staunchest supporters! They accepted my explanations and went along with the reform. I had more problems with middle-age parishioners.

Years later, my friend and teacher, Carroll Stuhlmueller, explained the reason for their reluctance to change. "They're young enough to hold out the hope that one day they're going to discover things in life that never change. The Catholic Church filled that expectation. Older people know that's an impossible dream. In their senior years, they simply take change for granted. It's become a way of life."

I frequently remember Teilhard de Chardin's remark that as a youth he longed to uncover an element in his environment that never changed. He thought he found it one day when he came across a small piece of iron from a broken plough. He couldn't bend, break or destroy it, until . . . he noticed it began to rust after it rained. He was eventually forced to admit the only thing that didn't change was change.

I presume the main reason Luke brings up the wind, fire and noise accompanying the Holy Spirit's arrival springs from that basic insight. Each is a disturbing element. (I distinctly remember letting my grandmother in on one of my treasured childhood plans. When I grew up I intended to cut down all the trees! That would stop the wind from frightening me.)

The evangelist presumes there's no need for the Spirit if the risen Jesus doesn't demand constant change in her/his community. For Luke, the Spirit is the force behind the Christ's wind, noise and fire, and causes the directions in which they blow, sound and burn. He's not alone.

For Paul, the Spirit instigates the gifts which are creating chaos in Corinth. And for John, the Spirit leads us into the great "unknown" that forgiveness creates. In each case, followers of the risen Jesus would be more unchanging, more peaceful if they just didn't have to deal with such an uncontrollable element.

I belong to a church that has consistently employed various (successful) hierarchical deforestation programs. Thankfully I've also lived long enough to have encountered a pope who's actually started planting trees instead of cutting them down. Francis must have had a very understanding and wise grandmother.

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